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THE JUSTICE OF A FRIEND.*

BY W. D. HOWELLS.

THE third part of Sir George Otto Trevelyan's history of "The American Revolution" continues the narrative of our war for independence, but it does not show any change in the author's point of view. That seems to have been so advisedly and definitely taken at the beginning that it could not well be changed without some such change as permits a man to desert his country or his party and go over to the enemy. If the author now turned against the Americans in his study of men and events, it would be something like Mr. Chamberlain's abandoning Gladstone and the Cause of Ireland, or Benedict Arnold's betrayal of Washington's trust and the patriotic hopes which had rested upon him: that is to say, for a man of the author's make it would be impossible.

One may not forget the force with which Mr. Goldwin Smith had urged a like conviction that the revolting American colonies were fighting the battles of English liberty. But in Sir George Trevelyan's work there is greater breadth if not closer texture; a whole condition of things is pictorially restored, and we realize that whatever was generous and courageous in every English class was then one with us in feeling. A large minority of Englishmen, the wisest and the best Englishmen of the time, were outspokenly our friends, from first to last, and there is nothing of faith in our cause and love of it, expressed in this history, which was not as fully and boldly uttered by the contemporaneous champions of the colonies. If now and then we have to blush for Sir George Trevelyan's praise, as something past the general merit, we may remember that it was the praise of

* "The American Revolution." Part III. By Sir George Otto Trevelyan. Longmans, Green & Co.

Chatham, of Burke, of Fox, of Walpole, and of other eminent statesmen and observers, who thought the colonies were right and the King was wrong. We may the more profitably take shame to ourselves in the presence of these friends whose words and deeds were in defiance of the base maxim, "Our country, right or wrong," and in behalf of the right whether it was of their country's side or not. We are yet far behind the English in their tolerance of the truth and their devotion to free speech. Even in the Spanish war when every man who hated it might have spoken his mind without the smallest hurt to the American arms, many who hated it when coming joined with the mob in crying down its opponents as traitors when it had come.

A lesson of impartial magnanimity is the best thing we can learn from the latest history of our Revolution, which we may read with increasing profit to the end. What is primarily characteristic of it is its thoroughly entertaining quality. Few historians know how to make battles interesting to the unembattled reader, and Sir George Trevelyan is one of the few: he can even make them intelligible; and he can enter into remote and alien conditions with a zest which the heir of those conditions cannot well refuse to share with him. The time covered by the present volume is that which stretches from the battle of Trenton to the battle of Germantown, and includes such events as the surrender of Burgoyne, the horrors of the winter at Valley Forge, the British occupation and evacuation of Philadelphia, the coming of Lafayette, De Kalb and Steuben, and the treaty of alliance with France. The hero of the tale is always Washington, but not a sentimentalized or even an idealized Washington. His limitations are distinctly recognized. The forms of this recognition, so finely yet firmly expressed, give us a portrait, self-evidently lifelike, of a great soldier who was a yet greater general, of a devoted patriot who had to deal with hostility almost as bitter among his compatriots as among his country's enemies, and who remains unique in history as having mainly fought a losing fight and won it. The subjective quality of Sir George Trevelyan's study of Washington is of such uncommon value that we might easily fail of justice to its objective truth. His Washington is a man who largely existed in his effect upon the friends and foes about him: upon Schuyler, upon Greene, upon Arnold, as well as upon Gates, and Lee, and the Congressional delegates

doubting and hampering him. His long sufferance of the miseries of his men in the winter at Valley Forge is something visible and palpable, but his patience with the suspicion and inefficiency and insubordination which surrounded him is something that must chiefly remain to such a sympathetic imagination as has here made him a more intelligible figure than ever before. His nature, as this historian interprets it, was what we all knew it, large and simple; but within this largeness and simplicity the latest student of his character has divined the sensitiveness, the capacity for tacit suffering, and the fine sense of fine things which were as essentially a part of the man. He was thwarted by circumstance, but never finally defeated; he was disappointed in his friends, but he was not mistaken in his enemies; he had no prophetic forecast of events, but he had the strength and courage to meet them, and to turn them to the public advantage.

The traits of Schuyler are aptly caught, but next to that of Washington the study of Arnold will interest and move the reader. It is Arnold before his treason, while he was yet a self-devoted patriot, a soldier of unsurpassed skill and courage, and a man able to bear things as well as to do them. He bore a great deal, a great deal more than we have remembered, from the meddling and muddling administration which put inferior men over him and displaced him from commands which he had pre-eminently shown his right and power to hold. The part of his story told here is that which relates to his substitution in the defence against Burgoyne, by Gates, who was perhaps as brave, but who lacked Arnold's brilliant generalship and soldierly ardor, and who threw away the fruits of his victory in the terms of capitulation granted the English. Arnold chafed long under such treatment, and he might have patiently borne it to the end; but a fatal temptation was too strong for his vexed and angry spirit, and he became his own ruin and infamy.

It is a pathetic story, and it is intimated with a full consciousness of its implications. One of these is not unjustly the characterization of Arnold's accomplice, the hapless André, as rather a light man, less apparently the stuff of tragedy than of the comedy such as he played in the invention of the famous "Meschianza," the histrionic spectacle of British and Tory society in Philadelphia during the winter of the English occupation. Yet André proved equal to his fate, so that now no one thinks of the tawdry

social event which he contrived, but only of the felon's death which Washington would have saved him from if he could.

It seems to me that above almost any other historian Sir George Trevelyan has the gift of contemporaneity. He enters not only into the nature of the people of whom he writes, but into the spirit of the time, as it varied from place to place and from person to person, keeping true to the eternal human throughout. He rehabilitates that forlorn yet heroic little remote American past, with no straining for the pseudo-picturesqueness which was once the desire of a happily obsolete school of historians. He writes of the Americans, ardently, yet impartially, as if they were so many Achaians, feeling all their great qualities, but not losing sight of their manifold meannesses, vanities, futilities and follies. Being alien in epoch and environment, he must realize us by imagining us, but he imagines us wonderfully well, if indeed an American of the present day may venture to be so confident of the true complexion of the America apparently extinct as to say so. He might have known those former Americans better by knowing, directly and at first hand, the actual Americans, but this is by no means certain. Such knowledge might have blurred rather than cleared his vision; and I cannot see what advantage any American historian could have of this Pro-American Englishman unless it were some American bred close to the facts of that anterior America which still so largely exists away from the "great centres" and the express trains connecting them.

It is too cheap and easy to say, as one is tempted to say, that the best part of his history are those brilliant final chapters relating to the powerful friends America made in Europe mainly in spite of American diplomacy. There were Franklin and Adams who availed, but the rest of our envoys were fifth wheels, if not worse, in our progress at European courts. The well-meaning inefficients are all amusingly sketched, but Franklin is done with the insight which can alone give value to portraiture. The portrait is possibly less vivid than that of Frederick of Prussia, but so was the man, and it must remain with the reader as of peculiar value in the centre of the grouped figures of Lafayette, of Choiseul, of Vergennes, of Beaumarchais, of Turgot, of that poor Louis XVI who always meant so much better than he ever did.

That King's honorable scruple was against us rather than for us; he really thought it wrong to abet the rebellion of a brother prince's subjects; but he drifted helplessly and almost hopelessly into the American alliance; and the study of this drifting, with all the contemporary circumstance, is one of the most admirable pieces of the work which is valuable always for being so often highly artistic. Yet I return from these European passages to those which relate to our affairs on our own ground with an insistent sense of their greater merit. I think the reader, let him have read never so widely, will find them of a fresh and very enlightening charm. The word poorly indicates their full effect, but it has been tempting me from the beginning by its prime fitness for this most friendly, but never too friendly, historian's work. It is felt not only in his treatment of men, this man or that, but in his treatment of events, and of local and general character. I get from this history as I have got from no other the consciousness that the fighting blood in the Revolution came in a vastly prevalent current from New England: that New England which was so little understood then or afterwards that the showier and savager sections were supposed to be its superiors in soldiership. The Republicanism also mostly came from New England, the faith and the works of human equality, though the orators and statesmen of the South phrased those qualities better. From time to time our author turns a point of this fact to the light and casts a luminous gleam over the whole situation. It was the stuff of the Massachusetts commonalty and the Virginia patriciate out of which the Revolution fashioned itself and kept itself alive; but Virginia came to believe in slavery and Massachusetts always believed in liberty, and so the high thinking and the noble doing begins to this day in Massachusetts and not in Virginia.

I have no means of knowing how far Sir George Trevelyan has gone to original sources in his history, but I have a feeling that little of value would have been added to his work by the most anxious documentation. It is above all a critical history, and none the less critical because it flows from strong previous convictions to strong ultimate conclusions; for the fear of his own partiality puts an honest man on his guard. Where he finds us wrong our friendly annalist does not spare to say so; one could fancy his being a little eager to say so, as in the case

of the administrational repudiation of Gates's conditions for Burgoyne's surrender, where Gates granted the Englishmen terms almost disastrous to the American cause, and Congress would not confirm them. But in our own war for the Union the Government at Washington refused to confirm the terms on which Sherman accepted the surrender of Johnston; and the like has happened before. It is not always the bad faith of Republics which eventuates so; after the War of 1812 the British Government kept for two years certain forts and posts in the West which it was stipulated should be at once surrendered to the Americans. Yet the historian is right in condemning the action of Congress: it was wrong, and a weak power especially ought not to do wrong for the right; somehow a strong power may less demoralizingly do wrong for the wrong.

I leave myself little room to say something I would like fully to say in praise of the admirable conspectus of situations which Sir George Trevelyan presents again and again, such as the winter at Valley Forge, the social gayeties at Philadelphia of the "Meschianza" time, the skirmishes, the marches and the councils of armies. The story of the Burgoyne invasion and the Burgoyne surrender embraces excellent pieces of art in this sort. As for the accounts of battles — their desultory and individual effects, their fluctuations and indefinite catastrophes—I could not go farther than to say that he might have imagined the art of doing them from Tolstoy and Stendhal; but this is going to the extreme.

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